UNITED NATIONS

World Chronicle

PROGRAMME: No. 594, recorded 31 May 1995

GUEST: **NOELEEN HEYZER**
Director
United Nations Development Programme for Women (UNIFEM)

JOURNALISTS: Judy Lessing, Radio New Zealand
Thalif Deen, Inter Press Service

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

WOMEN'S ISSUES

NOELEEN HEYZER, Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), discusses a number of issues vital to women in all parts of the world. UNIFEM works for a development agenda for women that addresses the realities of women's lives and benefits women directly, as well as protecting them from conflict and violence. UNIFEM also works to put women's issues on the international agenda to encourage the creation of an environment that is politically, economically and socially enabling to women. It also provides women access to resources, skills and information. Ms. Heyzer recognizes that UNIFEM has some financial difficulties because of the rising demands on programmes and the lack of sufficient contributions. UNIFEM is playing a major role in preparations for the Beijing Conference and plans to continue this role in the implementation of its recommendations and plan of action.

WORLD CHRONICLE is produced by the Media Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.

Duration:	28:00"
Executive Producer:	Kamil Taha
Director:	Livingston Hinckley
Production Assistant:	Ellen McGuffie

ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Over the last few decades, the world has witnessed major economic, social and political changes which have enhanced many aspects of our lives. But the fact remains that members of a major population group -- women, particularly those in developing countries -- still face a wide range of problems, from illiteracy to the lack of health care and job training. To deal with these issues, and many others, the international community will convene the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing late this year.

Our guest today has a special interest in the issues of women. She is Noeleen Heyzer, Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women, or UNIFEM. Joining me to talk with Ms. Heyzer are Thalif Deen of Inter Press Service and Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand. Ms. Heyzer, welcome to World Chronicle.

HEYZER: Thank you very much.

LITTLEJOHNS: Madame Director, the United Nations loves agendas, and I noticed in the documents that you provided for this programme that you have a women's agenda. Please tell us what a women's agenda is, or woman's agenda, as the case may be.

HEYZER: All right. Well, for a very long time we have fitted into other people's agendas. And I think we have reached a stage before the 21st century to say that we need to make some very basic changes in the human situation. Because many of the situations that we face are extremely unacceptable: the fact that you have 70 per cent of the world's 1.3 billion absolute poor being women; you have a situation where 75 per cent of affected and displaced people -- affected by war, affected by ecologically-fragile zones, affected by disruption of economies and so on -- being women and children. And therefore women increasingly have a very high stake in processes that bring about equality, that bring about sustainability. And so far what we have tried to do has been to see where we fit in addressing these agendas into other people's agendas, be it at a local level, be it at a national level, or be it at an international level.

We would like now to put all that together and say that we have a Women's Development Agenda, a Women's Development Agenda that addresses issues of equity and sustainability, and which is based on women's realities and based on women's rights. And we can put this together.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Heyzer, is UNIFEM advocating affirmative action for women? The idea that preference should be given to women in jobs, for example, training, health care, whatever it may be?

HEYZER: If you have a situation where 70 per cent of your population of women are poor, then you do have to, in a very strong way, say that women must have the right to education, women must have the right to food and to health care. Because even in countries where sometimes the government would have development policies along those lines you do have gender hierarchies that prevent the girl child from getting an education; you do have systems where the families, because of poverty, would force a girl child to drop out of school. And therefore, in that sense, yes. And increasingly we feel also that we need to synthesize many of the gains that have come out of the different world meetings, from the UNCED process --

LITTLEJOHNS: UNCED, what's that?

HEYZER: That is the United Nations Development Conference on the Environment, looking at sustainable livelihoods. -- Coming out of the Human Rights Conference, where we push and advocate the strong position that women's rights are human rights, and that we must look at the issue of violence against women. We need to break down the divide between the private and the public, because for a very long time violence in what was regarded as your private sphere was not regarded as an issue that should be addressed publicly.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean a husband could beat up his wife and nobody would do anything about it.

HEYZER: Exactly. Or you have a situation where the girl child is sold, because the family is in poverty; you have the trafficking of women --

LITTLEJOHNS: Or killed.

HEYZER: Or killed, exactly. Or the type of dowry deaths which you have. And all these, or even the case of your 100 million missing women, missing persons, because of abortions and so on, which is very, very much tied up with being very sex specific. And so the story goes on.

LESSING: So what is UNIFEM's area in all of this? What are you doing?

HEYZER: We are actually playing a very catalytic role. Because what is UNIFEM? UNIFEM is basically an innovative fund within the UN system, but it is a very special fund in the sense that it interfaces with the women's movement, it was born out of the women's movement, and it tries to bring the issues and the perspectives that have been crystallized in such a movement into the UN system. And within that what it tries to do is to be a very effective advocate for women. So what that means is that we put gender issues, women's issues, onto the UN agenda. So if you have an issue like the human rights issue, we make sure that the issue of women's perspective, the issue of women's rights is put very, very central to the whole UN agenda. If you have an issue on population policies,

well, we make sure that the whole reframing of the population issue is seen from the centrality of women's lives. If you have an issue that deals with social development, addressing poverty, addressing employment, then we make sure again that you have to look at that from the realities of some of the poorest women.

DEEN: Ms. Heyzer, UNIFEM is one of several UN bodies dealing with women's issues.

HEYZER: Right.

DEEN: I'm told there's one in the Dominican Republic, as you pointed out, and also there are certain divisions in the UN system that deal with women's issues. There has been a proposal for a long time that all this should be concentrated in one single authority, and there's a proposal to appoint someone at the level of under-secretary-general to advise the Secretary-General on women's affairs. What is your reaction to this proposal?

HEYZER: Well, at the moment I think that is still at the discussion stage. And --

DEEN: There is such a proposal, isn't there?

HEYZER: Well, there have been debates and talks about how.... The issue here is what is the best way of addressing these issues within the UN system. Should there be autonomous organizations that are centralized, or should there be mainstream organizations where you have focal points within each of those mainstream organizations? And our position is that there needs to be a base that is catalytic within the UN system, and that we have to strengthen this base to synthesize many of the gains that have come out of UN conferences and make sure that they get converted into very good, effective programmes, into policies that make a difference for the lives of women at the local level. And the best way of doing this is simultaneously to have your strong autonomous organization together with your mainstream organization.

DEEN: UNIFEM is one of those, is it?

HEYZER: UNIFEM is very much a strong base within the UN system addressing the empowerment of women.

LESSING: You mentioned talking about affecting women's lives at the local level. As we say in New York, give us a "for instance".

HEYZER: All right, fine. Well, UNIFEM is one of the funds that puts money directly in the hands of women. From about 20 years ago, one of the main actions that we have accomplished has been to make sure that women are empowered economically at the community level, be it through our credit programmes, be it through the development of community empowerment or be it through creating local jobs. And we have done that, in terms of providing new opportunities, in terms of skill training, in terms of providing

education. So in that sense I think even before the rest of the UN tried to build what has now been called "partnership with civil society", UNIFEM was way ahead.

LESSING: So is there an example of something? We've heard about the women's bank. Is it the Grameen Bank --

HEYZER: The Grameen Bank, yes.

LESSING: Okay, well. Are there others? I mean --

LITTLEJOHNS: That's in Bangladesh?

HEYZER: That's in Bangladesh, that's right, yes. There is SEWA, for example. SEWA, which is the Self Employment Women's Association. In India what has happened is that there is an organization that deals with women in the informal sector, because once we think of employment in terms of formal employment.... Three-quarters of the world's women work in the informal sector, work in the rural sector as casual workers, and there is no protection whatsoever. And therefore you have organizations of women that try to provide secure livelihoods to these women and try to do it in terms of providing them with credit, providing them with better housing, better organization, better systems of marketing. So these are all very, very creative examples that we have.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is this thing you just mentioned confined to India, or is it elsewhere in the developing countries?

HEYZER: Well, this particular example of SEWA is in India, but in the case of the Grameen --

LITTLEJOHNS: Is it something which is spreading? The idea?

HEYZER: Yes. It is spreading. But in the case of the Grameen Bank what you have now is people trying to bring and adapt that type of an example to other countries. So you have one in the situation of Malaysia, which is called Project Ikhtiar; then you have similar examples in the Philippines, in Indonesia, in Cambodia, in Vietnam, in many of the African countries. They're just spreading. I mean, the idea that you have to put money directly in the hands of women.

LESSING: So these are small loans?

HEYZER: These are small loans.

LESSING: Which the women then can repay?

HEYZER: That's right.

LESSING: Okay.

DEEN: Further, your organization has been in existence for about 10 years now, but there have been recent reports that you are in financial trouble and you might declare yourself bankrupt. How far is this true?

HEYZER: Well, let's say that we have been in existence for 20 years, first as a voluntary fund and then later on as UNIFEM. And I don't think we will declare ourselves bankrupt, although we do have some financial problems, but these are not insurmountable. Many of the problems are due to the fact that there have been a lot of demands on our programmes. We are a very small fund -- we have just about $11.6 million after 20 --

DEEN: Annual budget?

HEYZER: Annual budget. And this is after 20 years. And our constituency and then the demands are extremely strong. Of course there have been some problems of management oversight and financial oversight, but all that's been put in place, and I have to tell you that at this stage everything is in place, we are doing the rephasing, the staff cuts, and things are not as bad as they look.

LITTLEJOHNS: In the literature that you've given us, Ms. Heyzer, I read that you have the support of 16 national committees, and it lists these committees, but only one, namely the Philippines, is a developing country. Why aren't you getting more national committees in developing countries?

HEYZER: A very good question. Because it depends on the nature of the national committees. These national committees would really be our attempt to fundraise and, because of that, they are allocated largely in the developed countries. It is really to help us to mobilize our resources in terms of public education. So so far it has been very much based in the developed countries. And the Philippines is the first one in a developing country, but I would also like to say that Singapore, for example, has just established one.

LITTLEJOHNS: You're from Malaysia. Do you think Malaysia will do so?

HEYZER: I'm from Singapore.

LITTLEJOHNS: Oh, are you? I'm sorry. I thought you --

HEYZER: Yes, yes. But I've lived in Malaysia for many, many years.

LITTLEJOHNS: I beg your pardon. I thought you were from Malaysia.

HEYZER: Yes. But very likely Malaysia will too. And this is really our attempt to increase this resource base from $11.6 million to something much larger. I think we can do at least two or three times more than the annual budget which we have, precisely because there is such a lot of demand on our resources. And there is, as everybody knows, a decline in traditional donor resources, and the new money will have to come from the newly-rich countries. And many of them happen to be in my part of the world. And definitely --

LITTLEJOHNS: The dragons.

HEYZER: The newly-rich industrializing countries.

DEEN: You were referring to your part of the world, and it's your part of the world which has produced the largest number of women world leaders. To what do you attribute this?

HEYZER: Well, let's say that there has been a fantastic investment in women's education. And, in fact, I have often linked the high growth that we have experienced to the investment in social development, to investment in women's capabilities. You see, fortunately or unfortunately, we did not have natural resources; all we had were human capacities, which had to be built. And because of that, it was too much a luxury for us to differentiate along gender lines. Every single human capacity had to be used. So women were invested in. And women's leadership was valued. So in that sense I think many of the phenomena of high growth, many of the phenomena of stable societies have been very much rooted in investments which countries have made.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Noeleen Heyzer, Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women. Ms. Heyzer, you mentioned the women's movement. Is there a women's movement in the developing countries, or is it largely confined to developed countries? We know a lot about the so-called feminists: some people think they're overly aggressive in the developed countries, but how prominent are they in developing countries?

HEYZER: Oh, they are very strong in the developing countries. Especially after Nairobi, the Third World Conference on Women.

LITTLEJOHNS: That was 10 years ago?

HEYZER: That was 10 years ago. There has been a mushrooming of many women's networks, precisely because many of the issues of development affect women's lives. And it is not in the same framework of, say, western feminism; I think each one of us has our own history. And, therefore, many of the women's groups in developing countries will address the issues that affect women's lives from the perspective of their own history. You have a diversity of perspectives, different frameworks, but they are very real, because the issues are very real. Issues of structural adjustment, the debt crisis, poverty, family breakdown, violence against women, trafficking against the girl child, lack of education -- these are very, very real issues. And if they are not addressed at the national level, then women must make sure that they are, because the way resources get allocated makes a difference in the effect that they have in people's lives.

LESSING: Ms. Heyzer, will you, as the Director of UNIFEM, be taking one of the lead roles in the Women's Conference in Beijing? Will your agency be taking a lead role?

HEYZER: Yes. The way I put it is that when the celebration ends the work begins. And out of every conference that has dealt with women's issues, UNIFEM picks up the

pieces, makes sure that the recommendations get funded, makes sure that the resources.... Because we are the Fund to whom women's groups will come in order to implement the programmes that have come out of all these meetings. We are the Fund that builds partnerships between government and civil society to make sure that the action plans are developed at the national level and that things really happen at the community level. So in that sense, yes, a lot more in terms of implementation post-Beijing.

DEEN: Is there a price tag for this plan of action that is to be adopted in Beijing? And when you're cutting down resources, how could you cope in implementing this plan of action? Wouldn't you have any problems?

HEYZER: Well, I don't think that we are the only ones that will have to bring about the implementation of post-Beijing. But we will definitely have a very catalytic role in that implementation. At the moment we are cutting down, but cutting down with vision -- let me put it that way -- because that allows us to rethink our catalytic role. What is the role that we can best play in building new partnerships and trying to create leverage for other resources, the mainstream organizations? How do we make sure that governments come in a lot more? So let me say that I'm going on trying to generate more financial resources and at the same time bring in new partnerships in order to address these issues.

DEEN: Won't you have a tough time at a time when most of the western countries are cutting down on their contributions?

HEYZER: Everybody has a tough time. I mean, look at the people who have tried to deal with sustainable development. So I think the challenge is being able to deal with the tough times as much as the easy times. I mean, when I took on this job, I definitely did not think I was going to have an easy job.

LITTLEJOHNS: And it hasn't been an easy job.

HEYZER: It hasn't been an easy job, definitely.

LITTLEJOHNS: Tell us a bit about the cultural and religious problems that perhaps are an obstacle to women attaining the kind of things that you want them to attain.

HEYZER: Well, let me put it this way: Very often people would say, well, we can't push a particular issue too much because it is against tradition. Then my question is, what tradition? Because tradition is never static. It is dynamic. Culture, by its very nature, is a moving system, is a living system, and human beings have interventions in making changes, development. Education by its very nature brings about cultural change. So how do we in that process ensure that the changes that are already being generated do not disadvantage women? And you do have government policies that would come in, and sometimes there is a backlash to those policies to advance the life chances of women. But those are minority

groups. They reflect certain interests, and the interests of women are just as real as those interests that are being expressed by those groups.

LITTLEJOHNS: What about religious obstacles? For example, the Pope is adamantly opposed to the ordination of women priests. How do you deal with a situation like that?

HEYZER: I feel that it is extremely important sometimes to go into the essence of religion. And the essence of any sacred work, as far as I know, has always centred on respect, has centred on the value of human life and on equal partnerships. And I think that we need sometimes to go back to some of the very basic essence, and we have networks doing that. And there have been networks, be it in the Muslim world, be it in the Christian world, that take a new look at some of the normal interpretations. Because, again, sometimes we feel that perspectives have been blocked, that we have not had enough debate or discussion on certain issues, and it is basically a relooking.

LESSING: You talk about networks -- if I could bring you back to the secular world -- networks around the world of women. When you go to a UN conference you often find the most dynamic areas are where the women are congregating. I mean, I think so, but maybe I'm biased. How important are those international networks? I know you've been part of one: you were a founder of DAWN, one of the groups for women in the south.

LITTLEJOHNS: DAWN, what's that?

HEYZER: Development Alternative with Women for a New Era.

LESSING: So how important are those informal links, and how do you keep in touch with each other?

HEYZER: They are extremely important, because in a way they provide us with new space, a space that allows certain discussions to take place. It is a space that allows lessons to be exchanged; it is a space for rethinking, for strategizing, for building on common experiences. So I myself have benefitted by being a part of a number of international networks, and I have myself have created regional networks. And they have made a difference, made a difference in terms of being catalysts at the local level, trying to build up capacities at the community level. And they pull together women's capacities in a more visible way. Because suddenly you find a new confidence, and if I try to think of a third world conference and a fourth world conference, then what I see is a new confidence of many women from the developing world.

LESSING: This is a kind of a self-esteem in a way. I mean, we're looking at women's self-esteem as well.

HEYZER: Yes, it is self-esteem and much more: the ability to articulate, the ability to understand, and also the confidence to know that you can make a difference, that you can interface with your policy makers, you can interface with your governments, you can interface with the international system, and that you are taken seriously. And I think that this is so important to many women.

DEEN: Michael referred to the Vatican. Do you think that the question of family planning will be a divisive issue once again in Beijing?

HEYZER: I think the issue of reproductive rights definitely is an issue that will come up in Beijing again.

DEEN: I thought it was settled in Cairo.

HEYZER: It was settled in Cairo, and therefore it is important that the gains made in Cairo are not reopened again in Beijing. And I think there the whole issue is one of choice, one of women's empowerment, and that was the consensus that came out of a UN conference, and that's where it is.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Heyzer, do you consider yourself to be an advisor to Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali on women's issues, or does he have someone who is specifically advising him apart from yourself?

HEYZER: He has an advisory committee that is advising him on Beijing -- this is an extremely high-level committee. There's also a steering committee. But I know that he also knows the work of UNIFEM, and he takes it seriously.

LITTLEJOHNS: The reason I ask the question is that there's been a lot of criticism of the fact that women are very much under-represented in the United Nations Secretariat, and of course we all know that there are very few women delegates in the United Nations, certainly ambassadors, very few women ambassadors. Do you feel that the Secretary-General is doing all he might do to redress that situation?

HEYZER: Let's say that it is extremely important when we're talking about UN reforms and global governments to ensure that women's leadership is represented in the United Nations system. And if we are talking about the new ethics of global governance, then the perspective, the realities of women from the developing countries should also be there. And I know that he is doing as much as he can, but of course there are many of us who feel that a lot more can be done. But a lot of change has already happened as well. So let me say that the issue is taken seriously in the United Nations at this time, as they are rethinking their role at the fiftieth anniversary.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Heyzer, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Noeleen Heyzer, Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women. She was interviewed by Thalif Deen of Inter Press Service and Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

* * * * *

Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to: **World Chronicle**, United Nations, Room S-827, New York, New York, 10017, USA.

World Chronicle is broadcast worldwide and features guests whose work is concerned with major global issues. This programme is a public affairs presentation of this station from United Nations Radio and Television.

Additional information material about the United Nations can be obtained by writing to the Public Inquiries Unit, United Nations, Room GA-57, New York, New York, 10017, USA, or the UN Information Centre in your country.